

BY A STRANGE ROAD

By Kate Jordan

(Mrs. F. M. Vermilye)

IF we are, as has been said, the food we eat and the thoughts we think, then I am the hapless result of cheap food at stained tables, and of envy, defiance, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness.

This writing is penance, of a sort. It will show me just what I have sunk to in having loved Jim, married him, and stayed with him even when I found out what he was—swindler, thief, and every sort of cheap rogue, but with a handsome face, and a voice that can pull at my heartstrings even yet.

Oh, I was so different once! Tucked away in a corner of my trunk there is a picture of myself at seventeen, taken in Dresden when my father was at the embassy there. But I cannot write of that time. That girl of seventeen must be counted among the dead; there must not be a drop of her blood in me, nor one of her radiant, pulsing hopes, and my lips must be shut against the prayers she used to say in the fresh, sweet mornings. This must be so, if I am to live at all—I, who am Jim's wife.

I've been looking in a mirror, taking stock of my good looks—a diversion which costs me nothing and always cheers me. It's a comfort to like yourself. My skin is very white; a novelist would liken it to a camellia. My mouth is sufficiently good and sufficiently red, and I have wholesome, small, white teeth. My eyes are brown—the soft color of sealskin. My hair has always a tangly, bad-boy look, and it's very red, naturally so, of the

most fashionable shade. Unlike most of the red hair going, my roots justify the ends.

To-morrow, I leave this boarding-house. They'll miss me here. The old widows with tired eyes and baggy throats have made a pet of me. I looked like some dear relative of every one of them. The young shop-girls with blowsy pompadours falling to their brows made a heroine of me. They admired me from the depths of their commonplaceness because they did not understand me, for they saw me buy books, violets and cigarettes when I needed shoes badly, and kept wearing into November a Summer hat with flowers that had been rained on. All the young salesmen and old insurance agents paid me attention in their various ways, though a little afraid of me. They couldn't understand how a woman whose husband was most of the time mysteriously absent, who was pretty, with piratical social views, who smoked, and used a powder-puff frankly, could yet freeze them for a presumption.

Dear friends of poverty, I gave you something to talk about. Nothing quite like me had ever happened in the boarding-house before. I was a bit of flotsam evolved by experiences you did not understand. You'll miss me until gradually my memory is put away with last Summer's fire and the one suicide of years ago. Had you known the truth about Jim, you'd have given a wide berth to Jim's wife, and prayed God to keep you from all such.

My last letter from Jim disturbs me;

it boils with a mysterious elation which can mean only what he calls "graft." I don't know yet just what I'm to do. I was never a working partner before in any of his schemes. However, a registered letter with seventy-five dollars in it, with instructions to buy a plain, pretty gown and hat, was a comfort that took some of the bitter edge from my anxiety. I love pretty clothes. I love filmy, hand-made, embroidered stuffs, the inimitable look of old lace, the soft touch of furs. There are people who put money to ugly uses, but, spent esthetically, what beauty it can bring into life! This makes me think that after my shopping I have my ticket to Stamford, and just forty-two cents.

I found Jim waiting for me at the Stamford station in a high, black cart. He was driving, and he was alone. Just here I must utter another apostrophe to the magic of good clothes. What they can do for a man! In his smart, gray tweed, his patent-leather shoes and immaculate linen, his black hair brushed flat and shining like satin, he was a most bewildering counterfeit of a gentleman.

He lifted his hat formally, and murmured, in the hearing of various lounging, straw-chewing hack-drivers:

"Miss Lestray, I believe?"—my new name.

He held the horses in, while I stepped up briskly and cleanly, quite as if it were not the first time in years I had entered such an equipage. After turning the horses most cleverly, he did not speak till we were well away from the station.

"Old girl," he said, his blue eyes sultry with excitement, "this is the biggest graft in years. I tell you, Rhoda, it's great."

"Where did you get all the money, Jim—what you sent me—and, and—these clothes of yours?" I stammered.

A crafty look peaked his face. He smiled at some memory.

"I had good luck in Chicago."

"Oh, Jim"—I clutched his arm—"anything dangerous?"

"Never you mind—and take your hand away. Can't be too careful."

"Was it gambling?"

"Call it gambling," said Jim, and smiled again.

"I can't think why you want me with you. Your letters were very veiled, Jim."

"Foxy," he said, with a cheap astuteness which made me at once mentally transpose him from his high seat behind these gleaming, quivering horses to a restful position with worn coat-sleeves upon a rum-smelling bar, where he belonged.

During the three-mile drive to Hawthornden, he talked and I listened. There was no merriment in that talk, no lightness. It was hard, careful, anxious. It meant everything to Jim. Summed up briefly, the facts were these:

Two years before, Jim had known a man in the Klondike who was a mystery. He had died in the wilds with Jim, and had been buried there, known only as Brown. Jim took his possessions. They had seemed nothing but a package of useless papers, letters and photographs. But, when, months after, he had returned to Dawson City, having failed in the gold regions, he set about studying what Brown had left. He discovered that the dead man was Peter Convery, the lost, stray sheep of a good English family, who had for years lived a rough life in the Australian bush. There he had known one Arthur Herrick, had been a good influence in Arthur Herrick's life, and, while drifting to despair himself, had given him new hope, new purpose and a fresh start. There were letters from Arthur's brother, thanking him for all he had done. At this point Jim's business interest began, for he found that this brother, John Herrick, instead of an Ishmael, was a man of fortune and forty years, living, with his sister of thirty-eight, near Stamford.

To them, Jim had come a fortnight before, with his best society manner, an English accent and his false credentials, as Peter Convery, their dead

brother's friend—for it was Jim's luck that Arthur was now safely out of the way.

To them, I was coming in the mixed rôle of consulting housekeeper and companion to Miss Herrick, having, at Jim's suggestion, answered her advertisement. My reference, nicely forged by Jim, was from a society woman conveniently traveling in the vague region called the Orient. Jim had stolen the monogrammed and crested paper on which it was written from samples in a stationer's shop.

And Jim's intent? To rob so cleverly that he would not be suspected. There were to be all the appearances of a burglary by persons unknown. My part, he informed me, was to locate valuables, notably Miss Herrick's jewels, as I would have intimate access everywhere. After that—Europe, and a brief splendor for Jim and me.

"What's the matter? You're shivering," he said, in conclusion.

"Must I do this?" I prayed.

"I need you," he said, coldly. "It's the first time I've asked you to help me. Your part was always easy—spending the dough."

"My part," I said, hotly, "was lying for you, hiding with you, almost starving with you. Now you ask me to do this. I can't."

"You must," said Jim. "What did I marry you for? To be preached at and cried over? If you don't do what I tell you, I'll make you smart for it."

Yet, even then, I did not hate him. I only thought miserably of all I'd done for him who could say such words to me. Some women are like that. They have something in their souls that winds around a man, once he belongs to them, which clings fast even when they look with empty eyes, as I do, on the fleshless skeleton of love, and to cut it is like bleeding to death.

There was silence between us as Hawthornden came into view. A contraction of the throat burned me—

it was so like the home I once had, before I'd met Jim, when life was sweet and I was innocent. It stood on the side of a hill, a gray, substantial house, splotted with green and yellow stains, flaming vines cloaking it, oriel windows in the jutting wings winking from the leaves. Smoke rose in a straight, bluish column into the windless, sparkling air. A lush content smiled from it. Here were stability, self-respect, prosperity, peace.

Out-at-elbow *bohémienne* as I was morally, soiled of soul, desperate, hard, these aroused the half-dead hunger for good in me. The child that I had been was knocking at my heart. It was as if on approaching that house I were coming again into a kingdom I had lost.

In a shaded path where we were hidden from the windows, Jim brought the horses up with a sharp pull. He looked at me with a belligerent anxiety.

"Get that die-away look off, for God's sake!" he said. "This isn't a funeral. Are you going to spoil everything?"

"I'll play my part when the moment comes."

The appealing look that always softened me spread like a mist over his eyes.

"Rhoda, this means everything. Don't mind my being grouchy. You see, I'm up against it. I'll give up this sort of business after this—I swear I will—but I must pull this off, or—" He gave a shrug of dismay and helplessness, and we drove on.

In a few moments, I, having greeted Miss Herrick, was following a servant to my room. When I was alone, I looked into the mirror at my white face until it grew hateful to me.

"You've come to it at last, Miss Lestray," I muttered to those frightened, sullen eyes. "I always knew you would. You are to be a thief;" I could see the face sicken at the word, but I said it clearly again—"thief!"

All went well later. No one suspected us. Jim and I played our rôles of new acquaintances very cleverly. Jim amazed me, and even gave me much cynical amusement. His perfect self-possession, the ease with which he wore his new character, the brilliancy of his lying were matters to dazzle. If one elects to be a liar, there is, no doubt, a pride in doing it well. Jim's lies were like bits of a dissecting map where every morsel, no matter how curiously shaped, found its complement. I could not help a certain decadent admiration for his accomplished scoundrelism.

As I sat apart, demure, speaking seldom, and then in a very sweet, murmuring voice which was intended to express humility and amiability, I studied my employers, who were soon to be our victims.

Miss Herrick is a born celibate, one of those "nice" women that instinctively shrink from the least flavor of sex in their calm, purring lives. If some magic could transform a shaded, well-dusted, prim, soft-echoing Methodist meeting-house into a woman, the result would be Miss Herrick.

Her brother is an amiable fish.

A friend is expected soon for the shooting—which is good in these well-wooded hills—one Captain Featherstone, Hugh by name, Irish by extraction, said to be most attractive, who won his title and an army commission for his work as a volunteer in the Philippines. Even the Fish and the Methodist Meeting-house grow warm when they speak of him.

Captain Hugh Featherstone—from the moment I heard the name I felt a nearness to it. Sometimes the name of a stranger possesses this ghost-like personality, and you find yourself adding lines, coloring, expression, until the name's owner becomes an entity fashioned by your fancy. Such preconceptions are seldom far wrong. There is a magnetic understanding not born of the five senses, a conclusion not found in logic. Women possess it oftener than men. As they talked of Captain Featherstone, I saw him.

Without really knowing it, I was waiting for him.

I haven't written in three weeks. Captain Featherstone seeks me constantly. I am most unhappy. I can't write more to-day.

I might have known in that first look that I was bound to love him. I see again the shaded hall, the light from the stained, oriel windows falling on his face, as I came toward him. I carried a small basket of flowers that I was going to arrange in bouquets all over the house. In my neat, black-silk gown I walked gravely. Miss Herrick presented me, casually, as one does a semi-inferior. His gray eyes with violet lights, the strength and tenderness in his smile, his fair, thick hair of the unruly, boyish sort, were all externals to attract generally. But there was something else. It was his look. A magnetism in it drew me to him like a call. Something in each of us gave rapturous recognition and greeting. I don't pretend to understand this mystery. Had I never seen him after that moment, I'd have remembered his face and smile to the end of a long life. I felt an eerie, troubling exultation that he was much as I had fashioned him, but with the warm, generous glow added that only blood and breath can give.

Jim has thought well to insist on leaving, as other guests are coming, but he is only going to a small boarding-house a half-mile away, and is to come occasionally to dinner. He fears being closely inspected by many people. The Methodist Meeting-house told me to-day she would never forget what he had done for her brother Arthur. A month ago, I could have laughed recklessly over this with Jim. It is different now.

I walked for miles along the crimsoned roads early this morning. I seemed the only living thing in the still, dewy world. I prayed for the first time in years. A madness of grief has

overtaken me for what I have become. It would have been better if I had never come to this house. I was numb before where now I ache. Better to be the living dead than to know that, though you shudder and suffer, there is no turning back.

This afternoon I was in the garden with Captain Featherstone for an hour. The air tasted like well-water, the sky blazed in blueness, the blood-red and golden world trembled in ecstasy on the edge of a glorious decay. The nervous thrill of transition was in the air. It was so quiet that the note from a cow's bell in a pasture a good distance away could be heard. At intervals, a shot shattered the silence, as if invisible rockets were bursting in the upper sunlight.

I was steeped in a pervading sadness. Captain Featherstone, too, was silent. We were sitting side by side on a stone seat patterned with moss. When, after a vital pause, he lifted his book to show me a phrase he liked, my fingers touched his, and it was like the rushing together of our souls. We forgot the book. He took my hand with tender, passionate protection, and I listened to the saddest words of my life—the story of his ecstatic love for me, for me who could not take it because I am what I am!

Oh, God! great, unforgetting God, you have punished me! I am in the talons of an irremediable regret. I am exhausted. Youth seems retreating from me. I feel old, old.

Jim is growing very impatient. He realized that slow methods were necessary, but he is tiring of this calm, respectable life where there is "nothing doing." The sawdust of bar-rooms is in his blood.

Late the same night, I met him in that very garden. I know now that paradise can be as hell. It depends on what sort of angels we face there. He began by reproaching me for accomplishing nothing. I was silent. He asked for information, for suggestions for the furthering of his plans, and devised a scheme whereby

I was to get the necklace Miss Herrick seldom wore.

Oh, if years ago I had seen him with such informed eyes as looked on him then! For the first time, I saw clearly how his handsomeness went hand in hand with a featural contemptibleness. I measured his insignificant head, his lack of jaw, the wavering morsel of chin, the plausible mendicant that peeped out in his mean smile. His voice, of wonderful sweetness indeed, that I had thought once could almost call me from the grave, I estimated now as an accident, the result of certain vocal intricacies, no more an evidence of the man than the idyllic light he could summon to his dreamy, blue eyes was an evidence of the cold trickster leering behind them.

When he had finished his harangue, made up of commands and threats, with interjections of the cheap cajolery which had hitherto won me so easily, I spoke, very quietly:

"Jim, you are going to leave this place to-morrow."

"How can I?" he demanded, in anger; "I'm not a cent to the good by this job, thanks to you."

"You're not going to make anything by this job, Jim."

What he said would not be pleasant reading. He had a pretty taste in oaths; the gift of pictorial profanity.

"I'm sick of my life," I said, unmoved. "I'll not make it worse to bear. I'll not soil myself with work like this. Nothing can make me. I mean to leave here, too. But you must go first. I'll give you till to-morrow night to get away. If you don't, I'll tell them what you are, what we both are, and our business here."

He didn't believe me at first. When he did, he cursed me. My quiet maddened him, and he took me by the throat, shook me, flung me against a tree, and struck me twice in the face. When I came out of my stupor and pain, he had gone, and I realized that I had stumbled to the seat where I had sat that afternoon with Hugh.

"I love you," Hugh had said. "I want to make your life warm and sweet and sheltered."

I laughed in my misery, as I wiped my face.

The day following, at three o'clock, a farm-hand brought me a scrawl from Jim.

"I'm off by the four-twenty train. But don't you come after me. Do you hear? For good and all I've done with you. Understand."

I couldn't believe that he meant to go. This was probably a ruse to cheat me. Still, I had made secret preparations to leave, for the moments were becoming agonized.

The house was as quiet as a convent. The men were off shooting; Miss Herriek was taking her afternoon nap. I stole to Hugh's room, took a mute farewell of the dear, familiar things he had touched, and stole a half-worn cravat for memory. I was hurrying out when I saw a small, very old Bible lying half open on a table. It fell back at my shrinking touch, and I saw a faded photograph of a sweet-faced old woman in cap and kerchief; she had Hugh's eyes. With it was the rose, still fresh, that I had given him yesterday. My rose with his mother's picture in his mother's Bible! And such a love had come to me, the stained, the beaten—Jim's wife! The tears that fell upon that inapposite trinity washed my heart clean.

The sound of shots alarmingly near the house startled me. The men must be returning. I hurried out, and half-way across the garden I came face to face with Hugh. Beside a stern grief that had marked him since yesterday, there was another look in his eyes as of shock and pain.

"Don't go that way!" he cried, and drew me into a Summer-house.

As he spoke, I looked beyond him, and between the trees I saw some men carrying something toward the stables. The something was covered by a blanket. Hugh pressed me into a rustic chair.

"It's not a sight for a woman. A

shocking thing has happened. You heard shots a moment ago?"

"Shots!" My lips did not sound the word. I knew. I saw Jim's dead face everywhere, in the sunlight, the trees, in the trellis of the arbor—scores of them, all dead, stiff, the eyes shut and sunken.

"That good-looking fellow we knew as Convery has just been shot by a detective. He was a burglar—outfit found in his room—wanted for something in Chicago—tracked him here. As he ran, he fired—they fired—he dropped. He meant to rob the Herrieks, of course he did. Convery wasn't his name—Melcher—James Melcher."

He looked into my clammy face as I shuddered there. "It's upset you dreadfully."

Thank God! at last the faces began to melt away, smaller, smaller. I was aware that I was holding out my hands, piteously. Hugh took them, and pressed them, reassuringly.

"You're trembling. How frightened you are! No wonder. It's a ghastly, dirty business to have come so close to one."

Then came the temptation of my life, the impulse to be silent and let all my past go into the grave with Jim. As I sat thus, I felt suddenly a chilling separateness from my surroundings, a quiet like death's. Hugh's face was shrouded from me, and I was conscious of only myself and that one, ultimate moment. It was as vital as a spar spanning an unplumbed chasm; it meant everything or nothing; when it should have passed, I was to know that the garden of enchantment might be mine for the entering, or that I would deliberately, with honest eyes and breaking heart, have put up the bars to shut me out of it forever. The moment passed. My choice was made.

"Hugh," I said; and then I stopped. "Hugh, yesterday, when I told you I wasn't free, you didn't know——" I looked at him in anguish. "I'm free now, and yet I've lost you, lost you, because——" I began to sob in a weak, lax way. "I'm going to tell you the

truth. I could cheat you—I've cheated for such a long time—but I'll tell you, and then—you'll—never—never look at me that way again, and you'll never—touch my hands." I broke down, and fell against him, clinging to him even as I pushed him away, saying over and over:

"I was his wife! I was his wife!"

I've been ill for more than a week. This is the first day I've attended to my duties. After telling Hugh everything that day in the arbor, I felt as if I were dying. He helped me back to the house, and I remember his saying, clearly and rapidly:

"You don't know anything about this Chicago business? They can't connect you with it?"

"No. He went alone."

"Then don't let it be known you thought of leaving here secretly. They might suspect. Leave everything to me."

He took me to my room, removed my hat and gloves, tore up the letter I had left for Miss Herrick, even unpacked my trunk, I weeping weakly, and watching him. He sent for a doctor and nurse. They said I had a nervous something—I don't remember what. That was ten days ago. To-day, Miss Herrick told me all about Jim, as a piece of scandalous news. In her quiet, pitiless scourging of him, she ratified the meeting-house impression.

"Captain Featherstone is so Irish, so impulsive, so quixotic. He insisted on giving the fellow a quite usual burial, even paying for it." She

looked at the tears moving down my thin face, and said, in her bodiless voice, "You're emotional, too, aren't you?"

Hugh! God bless you, dear. Good-bye!

I'm writing these last lines in New York.

Pleading weakness and the need of rest among "my own people"—the rabble of a frayed boarding-house—I said good-bye at luncheon to the Herricks and to Hugh; I was to leave that afternoon. I couldn't read his face as I gave him my hand. He was very pale. His eyes did not meet mine, nor did he look at me fully as he held the door open for me.

"Oh, thank you," I muttered, brokenly, as I passed him, "thank you for all you've done for me."

How shall I write the rest?

In the train, I gave way. Desolation and heart-hunger fairly crushed me. I dropped my veil over my face, which felt damp and cold, and, with my head resting against the window, I closed my eyes. Some one sat down beside me—and it was Hugh! A hand took mine—Hugh's hand.

"You didn't think, dear, I'd let you go alone?" he said, and the look in his eyes was like the folding of his arms about me.

He has forgiven me.

He says I'm not wicked. He says it was because I "loved much" that I endured what I shrank from.

Oh, I always knew that, but that Hugh should say it lifts me to heaven!

